

Culture | The evolution will not be televised

Why gradualists are usually right and radicals are wrong

“Gradual” makes a passionate and convincing argument for incrementalism



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**Gradual.** By Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox. *Oxford University Press*; 240 pages; \$29.95 and £22.99

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evolutionaries have the best slogans. The Bolsheviks shouted “Peace! Land! Bread!” Mao Zedong promised a “Great Leap Forward”. Che Guevara claimed to “tremble with indignation at every injustice”. Advocates of gradual change, by contrast, find it hard to compose a good rallying cry. No crowd ever worked itself

into a frenzy chanting: “What do we want? Incremental reform! When do we want it? When budgetary conditions allow!”

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But as Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox argue in “Gradual”, incrementalism works. Revolutionaries promise paradise but often bring about bloodshed, bread lines and book-banning. Humanity has grown more prosperous by making a long series of often modest improvements to an unsatisfactory status quo.

The [Industrial Revolution](#), despite its name, was not a single, sudden event but thousands of cumulative innovations spread across nearly a century. “Over time, incremental reforms can add up to something truly transformative,” note the authors.

Both are American criminal-justice reformers, and although their argument applies globally they focus on their home country. Correctly, they observe that American politics has been flooded by what Alexander Hamilton called “a torrent of angry and malignant passions”.

On the right, [Donald Trump](#) and his acolytes have sought “the ultimate in radical change”: to overturn the result of a democratic election. “I am your warrior, I am your justice...I am your retribution...I will totally obliterate the deep state,” Mr Trump thundered on March 4th at a supposedly “conservative” conference. As president, he cosied up to Vladimir Putin and spoke warmly of some neo-Nazis.

Some on the left, meanwhile, deem America so rotten that old structures must be swept away. “[Defund the police!](#)” “Abolish ice [the agency that enforces immigration laws]!” The

authors refer to Ibram X. Kendi, a fashionable scholar, who wants to create a “Department of Anti-racism”, to be staffed by “experts on racism” with the power to veto any policy that fails to advance his definition of racial equity. They would have “disciplinary tools” to wield against public officials who dissented. This would, in effect, hand quasi-dictatorial power to a small group of people who share Mr Kendi’s world-view.

Mr Berman and Mr Fox admit that radical change has sometimes been necessary: for example, to achieve the abolition of slavery. But the more cautious sort is more often effective, because “gradualists know how little they know”. Anyone trying to understand a big problem is sure to miss crucial information. Errors are inevitable. Incrementalism makes it easier to correct them. New ideas can “be tested, evaluated and honed over time”.

The authors cite the example of Social Security, America’s public-pension system. During the Great Depression, two approaches were proposed for helping the old and hard-up. One was “radical, easy to understand and capable of mobilising one of the largest citizen movements of the 20th century”. Francis Townsend, a Californian doctor, proposed giving every American over 60 a pension of \$150 a month (\$3,500 in today’s money), on condition that they stopped working and spent the cash by the end of the month. The idea was that by retiring early, older folk would free up jobs for younger ones; and by spending copiously, they would stimulate the economy.

So alluring was this plan that supportive “Townsend clubs” went on to enroll nearly one in five Americans over 60. Had it been enacted, it would have been a disaster. Forcing the old to retire would not have magically created more jobs, and the Townsend

plan would have cost, by one estimate, “half the nation’s wealth without any plausible funding mechanism”.

The other plan was, in the authors’ words, “slow to develop, internally contradictory, and seemed hopelessly inadequate to the urgency of the moment”. President Franklin Roosevelt decided to frame his “Social Security” law of 1935 not as a handout, but as a reward for past labour. Workers chipped in via a payroll tax, and the benefits they eventually received were (very roughly) tied to their lifetime contributions. This made the programme stingy in the short run—the first benefits were not paid out for five years—but secure in the long run, because pensioners believed that they had earned their benefits “and would be furious if they were threatened”.

Initially, Social Security was far smaller than other bits of Roosevelt’s New Deal. It took 15 years and endless tinkering before it assumed the shape it approximately has today. Benefits to dependents and survivors were added in 1939; federal grants to help the states look after the disabled were introduced in 1950; and so on. Now it is the largest government programme in America, and so popular that pundits refer to it as the “third rail” of politics. In other words: you touch it, you die.

### **The tortoise and the snare**

Another intriguing example is the pacification of New York. In the 1980s some New Yorkers were so terrified of violent crime that they applauded a vigilante who shot four allegedly menacing teenagers on a train. Yet within a few decades the metropolis had become one of the safest big cities in America: the homicide rate fell by a whopping 82% between 1990 and 2009, the rate of car thefts by 93%.

For this startling turnaround, the authors credit not one big reform but what the *New Yorker* called “a thousand small sanities”. Legions of new police officers were hired, and a tough oversight board weeded out the bad ones. A new data system identified crime hot spots. Cops cracked down on minor offences that created an atmosphere of lawlessness, such as fare-dodging and public urination. Businesses clubbed together to clean up neighbourhoods; ngos offered after-school clubs for at-risk teenagers. As the number of eyes on the street grew, criminals ceased to dominate them. New York became a pleasant place to live, even as its prison population fell: specialised courts for drug offenders and the mentally ill sent more lawbreakers for treatment instead of locking them up.

Incrementalism can seem slow, Messrs Berman and Fox acknowledge, but modest changes are more likely than radical ones to earn a consensus across the political spectrum, and are less likely to provoke a backlash and wind up being reversed. They can be started sooner and, if they work, they can be continued or extended. Far from being a defence of the status quo, “incrementalism calls for ceaseless change”, from the continuous improvement of a Japanese car factory to the building of America, one immigrant family at a time.

Leon Trotsky, a revolutionary, once sneered that gradualism was “boring”. He helped plunge Russia into chaos, and was murdered with an ice pick. ■